

# COVID-19 burial guidelines in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on mundane daily tasks and significant cultural practices, including funerals and burials. Growing up, I observed that death in my family is a well-respected cultural process. It is believed that those who departed into the spirit world will be joining the living dead in the afterlife. For the deceased to be welcomed into the spirit world in the traditional sense, families perform specific rites of passage rituals during the burial. This is an important exercise to avert the wrath of the spirit world on the bereaved family. Attention to detail during these rituals is vital to assist the bereaved family in expressing their grief while simultaneously showing respect to the spirit world. As a non-practising sangoma, I had observed traditional funeral and burial processes long before the outbreak of the pandemic and understood their importance. While the pandemic shook traditional burial processes and made some rituals impossible, I found comfort in the knowledge that indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) could be used to appease the spirit world. In this article, I explain how IKS can assist bereaved families during funerals and burials to avert the wrath of the spirit world and find closure.

**Keywords:** *Burials, Ancestors, Bereavement, COVID-19, IKS, Rituals*

## Introduction

This article is based on two fields of knowledge, the one empirically acquired and traditionally transmitted through generations, and the other formally learned through formal education. schooling. Being raised by my grandmother, a traditional healer herself, I witnessed her training and was initiated with her at the *iphehlo* (= traditional school) and formally admitted to *ephehlweni* (= traditional learning process). Thus, I was exposed to traditional African practices from an early age where the beating of drums and invoking the spirits was a daily phenomenon to me as a child. My exposure to traditional spirituality was strengthened when I had to stay with my great-grandmother, also a traditional healer, in the Eastern Cape. Since the uncle to my grandmother, *utatomkhulu*<sup>1</sup>, was also a well-known *Sanusi* (= healer) in the village, the traditional setting with the customary healing practises were part of the identity of the family. It seems that traditional healing was running in the family. As an adult, I accepted and duly appreciated this identity, as my own journey also began where I had to seek my own spirituality, as the custodians had since joined the world of the living dead. Since for me this is still an ongoing journey, where I use the archives of childhood, it would seem as though the journey never ends. In my professional space, as a scholar, my methods of enquiry are two-fold, where I use modern enquiry tools and reflect to my spiritual background.

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<sup>1</sup> An *utatomkhulu* means a respected elderly man in a family. In this case the term refers to my great-grand mother's brother, thus an uncle to my grandmother and a great-grand father to me.

Thus, the present enquiry was sparked by who I am as a person in this modern world. My spiritual journey, the research I conduct on the handling of human remains, and the frustration I witnessed among communities and funeral directors in performing burials according to COVID-19 health guidelines, all resulted into this writing. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant changes to established ways of life. One example is the funeral and burial guidelines that have been globally applied to contain the spread of the virus.

This exposure prompted me to conduct desktop research to establish what other researchers are saying about African traditional funeral and burial processes that have been impacted by COVID-19 regulations. I also used documents to which I have access from the funeral industry, the Department of Health COVID-19 Guidelines (2020), and radio interviews where known Seers shared their views on the dismay caused by the new COVID-19 burial guidelines. I thus set out to answer the question, “how can families use the IKS during funerals and burials to get some form of closure and appease the living dead?” I also wanted to explore whether there is a need for a new form of communication during burials to appease the ancestors, from a South African perspective.

South Africa’s first lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, came into effect on 26 March 2020 and was set to last until 16 April 2020. This lockdown was extended until the end of April, as the number of infected people was still rising. During this time, funerals were permitted, with a maximum of 50 family members and mourners in attendance. Also, upon death, the human remains had to be buried in less than a week. The challenge with these guidelines was that, in the African culture, some communities perform elaborate funeral and burial rituals. These cultures believe that the last send-off is a rite of passage that gives families a final opportunity to show their love and appreciation for their departed loved one. The Department of Health’s COVID-19 guidelines seemed to oppose such traditional practices as families had no access to their loved one’s remains to perform any rituals. Moreover, the human remains could not enter the yard of the deceased’s home because it was believed these remains could be infectious. Funeral directors’ and family members’ inability to perform traditional funeral and burial rituals resulted in an incomplete mourning process and fear among the family that the world of the living dead would be brought into disarray. In this article, I aim to establish if the feared wrath from the living dead can be averted by using IKS to adapt funerals and burial processes to submit to the Department of Health’s guidelines while still appeasing the living dead.

Ndemanu (2018:70) claims Africans are not atheist or agnostic but believe in a higher being according to the traditional and spiritual knowledge passed on to them by their ancestors. This is illustrated in how they practice their beliefs based on their different ethnic traditions. Traditional belief is a pillar supporting the interconnectedness among African tribes. According to Akande (2013:141), “Africans have always been inclusive in their existence, by believing that humans are not the only tenants of the universe but believed that the universe is a realm for humans and spirits, in which the Supreme Being is believed to preside over plethora of sub-divinities and ancestral spirits”. Different ethnic groups have always followed specific rituals during burials, and although burial traditions vary among ethnic groups, they share a common belief in a life after death. Burials are thus conducted with the afterlife in mind, and the deceased is treated as a messenger to the spirit world. During the funeral and burial preparation week, the deceased acquires a new name, “Umufi” (Zulu for “the deceased”), and the family handles the human remains with the utmost respect, as though they are caring for their loved one in life. Understanding the world of the living dead is tantamount to understanding how and why traditional African practices are important to the spirit world. Over time, IKS have become fractured due to changing social settings, and enquiries into these knowledge systems have become a philosophical quest among those Africans who are still in touch with their roots.

### **Philosophical quest in the African context**

Bodunrin (1981:170) asserts that philosophy begins in wonder. The oceans, the stars, the phenomenon of birth, life and death, growth and decay have always been sources of wonder provided by the universe. Humans have also pondered life after death for centuries. The purpose of life and acceptable behavioural conduct and co-existence in a given space sparks philosophical questions. Marumo and Chakale (2019:6) report that Africa is a vast continent that incorporates various cultures and ethnic groups. All six regions are entirely different, and the term 'Africa' does not denote one homogenous group. In all these regions, there are complex units that, when clustered together, contribute to the umbrella term of 'African spirituality'. There is consensus among scholars that the definition of philosophy has remained a theoretical problem, especially from the African perspective, which leads to minimal agreement on what philosophy means for African societies. Oyeshile (2008:62) suggests that scholars tend to agree on the description of philosophy rather than the definition. Scholars agree that philosophy means 'love of wisdom', which is acquired over time by a society through life experiences and existing African knowledge systems. Thus, for this article's purpose, philosophy refers to the indigenous knowledge repository that evolves over time, shaping African belief systems to solve modern-day phenomena.

### **Philosophy and spirituality**

Spirituality is emotive and refers to dwelling in the domain of the truth. In the spiritual quest, the power of words arouses particular feelings (Robinson, et al. 1948:79). As a child, I was fortunate to be raised by my grandmother and father in the Eastern Cape. My spirituality has thus been shaped by what I witnessed as a little girl, my enquiry into some rituals in my childhood, my understanding of how and when to talk to the living dead, and how I was introduced to the Supreme Being (*Uqamata/Umvellinganga*). Therefore, I consider spirituality as learning through experience, practice, and participation, with the main aim of seeking the truth.

Waaïjman (2004:1) observed a megatrend in spirituality among societies. This trend was characterised by societies returning to their roots, which I refer to as spirituality. The author identified different types of spirituality and wrote extensively about 'primordial spirituality', which refers to the basic process of existence. In the traditional context, it is important to enquire what the 'primordial context' of African spirituality is. Waaïjman (2010:1) identified various synonyms such as "African spirituality, traditional spirituality and primordial spirituality". Ultimately the author chose to use "primordial spirituality" as the term originally refers to the earliest stages of growth, the primaeval stages of creation and development. This view that spirituality is a process of basic existence has been adapted to suit the narrative of this article, where it is taken to mean a revisit to IKS to solve modern-day challenges of humanity. Waaïjman (2016:1) also found that spirituality can be defined as a field of interest, where the spirit becomes the inner dimension of human reality. In this human reality, beings become open to transcended and ultimate dimensions, depending on their spiritual affiliation. Hence, African scholars such as Mazama (2002:219) view spirituality as part of the Afrocentric quest.

In the African context, people do not conceive themselves as separate from the cosmos, but as completely integrated into the universe that is much larger than them yet centred around them. Thus, the scenarios of life and death in the Afrocentric view are perceived as different modes of being. This poses a challenge in religion as these worlds are intertwined according to African spirituality. Also, despite the seeming contradiction between spirituality and religion, various scholars – such as IGBON (2014:27) – are using the two terms interchangeably. Newman (2004:103) points out that the distinction between spirituality and religion can be fuzzy, and in some writings, the two terms are used as synonyms. Waaïjman (2013:15) also found that the symbiotic nature of religion and spirituality ceased to have boundaries around the twentieth century. In that period, artists, especially poets, perceived mysticism as a

universal essence of spirituality. Western mystics chose to perceive the experience of the Supreme Being as one who is beyond every concept of humanity. Thus, over time, the boundaries between religion and spirituality narrowed. However, being religious and spiritual in some religions is considered as living a double life. I have noticed that in South Africa, there is a continuous and heated debate between those who place themselves in the African spirituality bracket and those who claim to belong in the Christian bracket. I have also noted with interest that, though it is widely believed that the West brought Christianity to Africa, these debates are often between Black South Africans, and in most cases, Christians accuse those who belong to the African spirituality of serving two masters.

IGBOIN (2014:35) argues that African spirituality is a conscience that has always been a way of life for Africans, long before colonialism-established religions saw being spiritual as an abomination. Moreover, according to Ndemanu (2018:71), there is inescapable embeddedness in traditional African religion and people's way of thinking.

According to Maponga (2020), African spirituality cannot be defined in Eurocentric terminology. The author narrowly defines religion as an activity of going to church on a particular day, and after church, you take off your 'church' clothes and live as normal. Clarke and Byrne (1993:6) also reported a challenge in pinning down a customary context to the word 'religion' as it is of Western origin; hence, there are doubts about its applicability to non-Western institutions. A simpler definition would be that 'religion' is a classical rendering of due services to the gods in the way of rites and obedience. Conversely, spirituality is a lifestyle, and African spirituality can only be defined by Africans in their own social settings.

Most Seers agree that African spirituality is dynamic and has been evolving to confront Africa's problems. I agree with this assertion since time and habitual settings have developed to such an extent that primordial spirituality must be adapted to new social settings. Thus, the IKS repository is useful and can be adapted to suit the new settings of an environment at any given time. Fitch and Bartlett (2019:112) wrote an article on "Patients' perspective about spirituality and spiritual care", and the results reported four themes: spirituality is personal; when people are sick, they experience spiritual distress due to the impending separation (possible death); care is about connection; and conversations about spirituality must align with the patient's beliefs and the value of connections in one's spiritual community. Primordial spirituality ultimately guides the one who is embarking on their quest for a certain kind of knowledge and wisdom. Seeking wisdom from the primordial spirituality repository thus lands one in a philosophical quest.

### **African philosophy**

Philosophy has been argued to be a search for the truth. Scholars such as Payne (2015:5) and Henry (2013:593) have agreed that the definition of philosophy is a perennial philosophical problem. In principle, African indigenous cultures were disqualified from occupying a place in the philosophical context. Bongmba (2004:295) posits that when President Thabo Mbeki spoke of an 'African renaissance', he was trying to conscientize South Africa to the importance of understanding the roots of being an African. In subsequent years, the South African education system re-ignited the decolonisation enquiry when it became clear that the African philosophy was a ship being pushed by the sea, in a direction never intended by Africans. The only point of agreement within the fraternity of African scholars is that the criteria used to define what is and what is not philosophy in the world today are unfairly biased and constrained by Western cultures. Bongmba (2004:292) thus asserts that the word 'philosophy', in the African perspective, has not been handled with justice. Van Hook (1997:387) further argues that, in some instances, even Africans in their philosophical quest reflect the influence of Western philosophical paradigms, to which the African philosophy haphazardly conforms.



There are always contentious narratives when it comes to African philosophy. This is evident in Allen's (2013:18-19) writings, where the author mentions it has taken her a long time to understand African American philosophy, despite being trained in philosophy. This has been the challenge for African philosophers, as they tried to define what African philosophy is. Ultimately, African scholars, such as Abdi (2011:81), Ogunnaike (2017:183) and Allen (2013:18-23), claim there is no need to align African philosophy with Western philosophy in order to understand the African philosophy. I argue that Africans have always been on a quest to follow their forbearers' teachings, which means the philosophy of being African has always been part of their daily existence. Similarly, Oelofsen (2015:137) agrees that the core of African philosophy is to bring life's experiences to the surface and reflect on those experiences to juxtapose the past, the present and the future. This allows for the possibility of new forms of expression, which is what is required to solve the challenges of traditional burials in the COVID-19 era.

### **Death passage rites in Africa**

Death rites of passage, rituals and funerals are valuable and therapeutic, and have an emotionally and spiritually beneficial effect for the bereaved. Gadberry (2012:161) defines a funeral as a ritual of termination, a time to show respect, say goodbye and honour the dead. In one of the Nguni (Isizulu) traditions, burial has two distinct names, "ukutshalwa" (to inter the human remains – only used for a burial of a king) and "ukungcwaba/ukufihla" (meaning 'burial' – used for the burial of any person). Lee and Vaughan (2008:344) wrote that Africans do not cut themselves off from their dead but exist in relation to the world of the dead; the ancestors. Also, Ukwamedua (2018:25) concurs that Africans have always seen ancestors as an important aspect of the constitution of the African past-life that influences the present and future. Thus, in Africa, the living and the dead together constitute the spiritual world, where a connection is sought through specific appeasement processes. However, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have created a spiritual rupture, with significant consequences in traditional societies where the physical world and the spiritual world appear to be in disarray. This confusion emanated from the COVID-19 burial guidelines prescribed by the Department of Health.

### **The confusion of the COVID-19 burial guidelines**

In my research with funeral directors, I have witnessed frustration between the undertakers and bereaved families. In the African culture, when a person passes away, there are indigenous protocols that must be observed by the family. First, in the week preparing for the funeral, neighbours and distant family members are expected to visit the bereaved family, and they remain with the family until after the burial. Because of COVID-19 social distancing protocols, neighbours cannot visit the family to offer condolences or pay their respects to the deceased; only the immediate family is permitted to gather in the burial preparation week. This results in an imperfect type of mourning because, in the African culture, death communities gather to give the family support through prayer, singing and encouragement. Second, a day before the human remains are brought home, families commute to the morgue to wash the deceased and dress them in their preferred clothing. COVID-19 guidelines do not allow for this ritual, leaving the family feeling inadequate in caring for their departed loved one. Third, the COVID-19 human remains may not be brought to the home a day before the funeral to spend the night with the family, as is custom. The funeral director only brings the body to the family home on the day of the funeral, and for a short period; the body remains in the hearse and cannot be viewed by the family. This has left the families in an incomplete mourning process, where healing is hindered.

The prescribed COVID-19 health guidelines were thus a shock in the African burial culture, and in certain instances, funeral directors were forced to open the coffins as families demanded to see their loved one's human remains. According to the COVID-19 guidelines,

this posed a severe danger of spreading the virus, and it was alleged that in 2020, most of the super spreader events were funerals. I use “alleged” because guidelines were amended towards the end of 2020, and bereaved families were permitted to view their loved one’s remains through a transparent body bag. Ultimately, all the initial guidelines were questioned towards the end of 2020, as discussed in greater depth in sections to follow.

At the 2020 human remains forum in Mbombela (of which I am a member), environmental health practitioners explained an occurrence that took place in a rural area; one family forced the undertaker to take the body of their loved one into their home, where the family performed the necessary rituals on these COVID-19 remains. The family insisted they would not undermine their living dead; they would rather contract the virus than show disrespect. In the same year, Owens (2020:1) and Yancy (2020:1891) found that Black people were dying at much higher rates (50–80%) than other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, when funeral directors enacted new policies regarding how the deceased are funeralized and buried, many were met with resistance by the bereaved families due to the cultural implications for Black people. Moreover, in some rural areas, social distancing was difficult to comprehend as funerals, burials, and other traditional ceremonies create moments where communities bond and provide comfort. According to Jaja, Anyanwu and Jaja (2020:1072-1075), there was a spike in COVID-19 rates in certain parts of South Africa as health guidelines were not observed during funerals, which could have been caused by the lack of social distancing because of the numbers of funeral attendees. A notable result of not adhering to the burial guidelines was observed from the Eastern Cape, where 80% of new infections were attributed to one burial ceremony, and in Port Elizabeth, 160 cases were reported after two funerals.

### **Death and COVID-19 in the African systems**

According to Moore, Jones-Eversley, Tolliver, Wilson and Jones (2020:1), COVID-19 has no respect for race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, socio-economic status, political status, nationality, or global residence. Exposure to the virus expeditiously threatens the health and life of anyone in its vicinity. In America, Jaja, et al. (2020:1071) found Black Americans were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, and many funeral directors in America followed new policies regarding how the deceased was funeralized and buried, with significant cultural implications.

In the African culture, when a loved one is dying, family members often anticipate the hour and minute of their loved one’s last breath; loved ones therefore surround the person. During this time, it is believed that the dying undergoes a process when they converse with the spirit world and, in most cases, they tell those around them who they see in the spirit world. But the pandemic guidelines have made it impossible for the dying to share these moments with their loved ones because of social distancing. This results in a lonesome journey for the deceased and the family. Closure seems impossible, and the bereavement process seems to linger longer than usual. It was therefore discovered that, during the pandemic, dying, death, and grief protocols during disease outbreaks disrupt traditional and cultural customs and grieving patterns.

### **Burial in the African context**

Regardless of the dynamic religious views and practices that do away with ancestors, there is a growing decoloniality among South Africans. People are returning to practising their culture and traditions, and ancestors are once again becoming part of our existence. Some individuals have always been grounded in the traditional African practices, while others left and returned to their ancestral customs. Therefore, most Africans still speak to their ancestors daily, and during traditional ceremonies, the communication is amplified by rituals.

Though I was raised by a great-grandmother and a grandmother who observed traditional practices and a grandmother who was initiated and became a non-practising sangoma, I have noticed a wave of people accepting their ancestral calling over recent years. In townships and rural areas, many sangomas are starting the journey of initiating those who have just “realised” they have a calling. The emersion into African spirituality during initiation instils the importance of burial rituals in the seeker, and the departed family member is understood to be a vital link between the living and the living dead. This means that most families wish to send their deceased loved one to the spirit world in a traditional manner, and a healer is sometimes responsible for conducting the final send-off on behalf of the family. Interestingly, at some funerals one finds a priest and a healer taking turns to conduct the funeral. This typically sparks a debate about where the deceased’s soul is going; is it going to God or joining the spirit world of the living dead? This becomes a perennial problem that sometimes leaves families in disagreement.

### **Disarray in Black communities’ burial systems**

As stated, the disposal of human remains must follow strict guidelines, as adapted from the Department of Health’s guidelines by the Department of Cooperative Governance. It was tabled that, upon the confirmation of death and the cause of death, double bags must be used to transport the deceased to the mortuary, and those transporting the body must be in full protective clothing (Department of Local Government, Western Cape, 2020). In some instances, all human remains were treated as those of COVID-19 remains. Families were not allowed to perform cultural rituals on the body, either in the morgue or at home. In most cases, families were not even allowed to view the body.

It appears that this came as a shock to the spirit world, and families of the diseased in some areas approached the municipality for exhumations. They complained that the spirits of their deceased family members were coming back in dreams, complaining about the manner in which they were buried. An example was shared on radio SA FM by Adriaan Simpee, where a caller stated they received an unsettling message from the spirit of their deceased mother asking her to slaughter a white goat to appease the spirit world since the manner in which she was buried was not pleasing to the living dead. The Department of Health received a growing number of applications for exhumations of recently buried remains of people who died from COVID-19 and decided to call a meeting with the funeral industry on 26 January 2021 (RSA, 2021). The following was explained in terms of the handling of human remains:

- The original burial guidelines never stipulated that the actual coffin/casket should be wrapped in clingfilm or any plastic material. The Department of Health’s first lockdown burial guidelines only required that the body be placed in a body bag before being placed inside the coffin/casket.
- The Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 has since recommended that it is no longer necessary to place the deceased in a body bag before placing them in the coffin/casket (Department of Health, 27 January 2021).
- Families are allowed to view the deceased only in the confines of the mortuary or under the strict supervision of mortuary staff, if done at home. No touching of the deceased is permitted during viewing. Precautions must be taken by mortuary staff to ensure that viewing is done in an orderly and safe manner, adhering to social distancing and other safety measures.

This revision of the early guidelines is no surprise since all the initial guidelines were drafted without prior knowledge of such a pandemic.

## How different cultures perceive ancestors

I was raised with the understanding that departed elders are always to be respected by their family. During my formative years in the Eastern Cape, I noticed an elaborate ceremony twice a year, starting on a Wednesday and lasting until Sunday. On a Wednesday, village women gather pots and other utensils to start brewing African beer, bake, and fetch water and wood to prepare for a ceremony. Friday or Saturday afternoon, men gather at the specific household conducting the ceremony to assist in slaughtering and performing all other rituals that can only be conducted by men. Interestingly, there is no proper invitation; only the smoke from ceremonial fires would be a form of communication. This same process is followed in the preparation of funerals. Women and men dress appropriately in respect of the ancestors of the family they are supporting. This process is no different from other ethnic groups, and it shows, to a certain extent, that different cultures have one thing in common, namely the acknowledgement of the living dead and respect in the form of the support villagers show each other's traditional ceremonies. Thus, in all ethnic groups, some individuals and families still believe what their ancestors taught them, and they continue to practise those rituals. These families still involve the living dead for each occasion, be it a celebration or a funeral.

The Nguni tribe call their ancestors "*Amadlozi* or *Izinyaya*", whereas the Sotho tribe call them "*Badimo*". Mokgobi (2014:3) defines ancestors as the living dead; they are compassionate spirits who are blood-related to the people who believe in them or maintain a connectedness with them (Cutler, 2015:40). The ancestral lineage normally comprises relatives who have departed, such as deceased grandparents, parents, great grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Ancestors continue to show interest in the lives of the living, and in some cases, this connectedness is initiated by the living dead in the life of their relative, who is still on earth. The living dead persists until the living accepts this initiated connection and embraces it. The connection does not come overnight but starts as a slow nudging until the chosen family member matures spiritually. This maturity in connectedness comes in various ways. Sometimes it comes in dreams, and at other times, a series of unexplained misfortunes can be experienced by the chosen one. Ultimately, with the assistance of Seers, the living gains an understanding and accepts that ancestors wish to speak through them.

Mokgobi (2014:2) argues that those who heed the ancestral call do not worship ancestors, but they appease the living dead through rituals and incantations. This acceptance is regarded as reverence, veneration or remembrance, but not ancestral worship. In my journey, I was first introduced to the Supreme Being and the "Lords' Prayer" by those who raised me, who have since departed, and whom I call the living dead today. I do not ignore the fact that there are various debates about God and ancestors, with some claiming one cannot serve two masters; yet, while this stance is valid, until one experiences a series of unexplained misfortunes for an extended time, these debates should be viewed in context, which has been the case in my spiritual journey.

While most religions do not welcome this connection, traditional churches like the Roman Catholic church and Church of Nazareth recognise the belief in the spirit of the dead, and burial rituals performed during funeral are welcomed by priests.

## Role of ancestors in times of crisis

As explained, the death of a family member does not mean the end of a relationship. Often, families still revere the departed and conduct ceremonies where animals are slaughtered to convey a message to the living dead. It could be in the form of *ukubonga*, *ukucela*, or other festivities such as weddings, *ukulobola* or *imbelelko* and initiations. Dr Nokuzola Mndende (2020 SABC News) asked the pertinent question, "What must happen now to traditional ceremonies since they were postponed during lockdown, with a hope of conducting them during level 1?" At the time of that interview, no one anticipated a second wave of infections



would ravage the country immediately after level one was attained. This raised questions about whether families could postpone their much-needed ceremonies if they have already communicated their intentions to the living dead? As a leader in traditional affairs, Mndende (2020) asserted that:

- *Ithonglo liyeva ngendlebe zomoya* (The living dead listen when spoken to)
- *Ithongo liyabona ngamehlo omoya* (The living dead see with the spiritual eye)
- *Ithongo linovelwano* (The living dead have mercy)

Mkhize, a Seer (2021), concurred and stated that the living dead do listen, and expectations can be humbly negotiated with them. Mkhize claims that IKS always present a way for people to communicate any undesirable situations to their ancestors, which is why they are called the 'living dead'. Thus, instead of postponing ceremonies, African spirituality allows communion with the living dead in a respectable methodology, where the concerned family can explain why an alteration to traditional practices is required. The existing pillars of culture can then be adjusted in consultation with the living dead, where rituals can still be performed in an adapted manner that adheres to the COVID-19 guidelines imposed by the Department of Health. In support, Varum and Grossmann (2017:6) saw ecological dimensions of culture as one aspect that may force a culture to adapt to such dimensions. This happens when basic physical and social environment features can be negatively affected if burial processes are not adapted. In this pandemic era, adaptive behavioural responses must be aligned to the prescribed Department of Health guidelines. I agree that culture is dynamic, and since the world is fluid, it requires all those who inhabit it to adapt to environmental and societal changes.

### **New language for COVID-19 and ancestral communication during African burials**

In South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, such as Zimbabwe, scholars have lamented how the pandemic has affected cultural practices, like body viewing and performing rituals on the deceased's human remains. Black communities in Africa have always started communicating with the deceased before the remains are placed in the soil. For non-accidental deaths, the burial process typically starts on a Thursday if the funeral is held on a Saturday or Sunday. On Thursday, the family visits the morgue to wash their deceased loved one and dress them in their preferred or favourite clothing. Some customs require that they wash the deceased's body with certain herbs used for funeral rituals a day before the body is delivered home to spend the last night with family and mourners. Moreover, Edwards, Makunga, Thwala and Mbele (2009:7) assert that ancestral ceremonies typically consist of gatherings accompanied by a sacrifice of some kind, such as a goat, sheep, cow, or bull, depending on the deceased's hierarchal position. The slaughtering occurs as soon as the body arrives and the family views the remains, paying their last respects.

**Table 1: COVID-19 burial and traditional burial**

<b>COVID-19 Burial</b>	<b>Traditional Burial</b>
1. One or two family members can view the deceased's remains.	1. All family members traditionally view the remains.
2. The human remains must be sealed in three body bags (Laws Africa, 2020).	2. Family members normally want to have access to the remains of their loved one. In some cases, families perform traditional burial rites.
3. The body should not be brought home as per the African tradition, but to observe culture, the body can be brought home on the day of the funeral for 30 minutes.	3. Traditionally, the body arrives at the family home the day before the funeral and remains overnight until the morning of the burial.
4. The body cannot be removed from the hearse.	4. The hearse leaves the body with the family until the following day.

### **Adapted from Laws.Africa (2020:19)**

The pandemic has resulted in bodies being deemed highly contagious. In most cases, remains are not open for viewing and are covered in protective clothing and placed in a sealed coffin. At the gravesite, male relatives can no longer fill in the grave, and families are not allowed to stand next to the grave to pour soil on the coffin as a last show of respect. COVID-19 has halted all these rituals, and the ancestors need to be appeased. The question is, therefore, how should this traditional send-off take place now?

### **Traditional/cultural send-off**

Mwandayi (2011:78) observed that Black communities in Africa are torn between Christianity and traditional African values. In an attempt to highlight this conflict, the author posits that in 1995, South Africa held a bishop's conference, where the pastoral statement on inculturation highlighted the following:

“Another difficulty we will encounter is the already existing deep wound caused when the local culture was neglected or even despised for many years. We have to work for the healing of such wounds. We begin our task of inculturation by asking pardon for having hurt others, by not respecting their culture in the church for 50 years”  
(Mwandayi, 2011:78)

This neglect disrupted the composition of cultural practices in the handling of human remains. In the article titled “Death in slow motion: Funerals, ritual practices, and road accidents in South Africa”, Lee (2012:195-196) introduces the emergent language of talking to the dead based on the road deaths for which Minister Sbu Ndebele attempted to intervene on behalf of the Xhosa-speaking people. The author introduces the language as a banal (intimate) type of conversation occurring in mortuaries or accident scenes. This banal (intimate) language is said to both express and help contain the spiritual threats embodied in road danger. Though I agree with the author, the term “banal conversation” is troubling. When communicating with the living dead, nothing is boring about the exercise, except for the anticipation of the removal of the spiritual trauma. Thus, it is not a new practice to ‘collect’ the spirit of the departed family member who has died accidentally at a certain identifiable place.

### **Ancestral lingual revival: Discussion with Igedla (Seer)**

Traditionally, Africans have employed an antenna to connect with the spirit of the living dead, primarily if an accident occurred and a family member died in a place other than their home. In these instances, the branch of a special tree is used to speak to the deceased's spirit. Often, the communication commences by ‘fetching’ the spirit where their last breath was taken. The family elder talks to the deceased via this special branch and conveys everything that is happening, as though they are instructing a living being to find a resting place and connect to the living dead on the other side. Thus, in the African IKS, a branch is a trusted medium for speaking to the deceased, following strict guidelines until the place of burial is reached. Some images of the tree used in communicating with the deceased and the living dead are presented in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1:** Mlahlankosi/Umlahlankosi/Phafa/Buffalo-Thorn/Blinkbaar-wag-ń-bietjie  
Source: Life Green (2020:n.p)

The Department of Health's guidelines for the handling of COVID-19 remains seem to resemble death by an accident. Therefore, I take the following from Lee's earlier stance: to facilitate COVID-19 burials, the same manner of communicating with the fallen spirit of a person who died from an accident can be revived with consultation from the Seers. The branch of a tree can be used to communicate all the required guidelines to the human remains and, on the day of cleansing the body at the morgue, the chosen family representative should start the intercession with the branch. The spirit of the deceased can then be summoned to start the communication process. This communication may assist in facilitating closure for the family and communicating with the departed soul without causing disarray in the spirit world.

### **An adapted process of communication**

According to the IKS, a family has to start communicating with the spirit of the deceased when leaving home for the mortuary and inform them of their whereabouts and why. If the family is allowed to view the body at the morgue, they use the branch to inform the spirit that, though the body is in a foreign place, the family is taking the body and the spirit back home. On the day of the burial, the family must converse the arrival of the deceased's remains through the branch since the body cannot be brought into the house. Lastly, when the remains leave for the cemetery, all the last salutations should be done through the branch since the family members are not allowed to view the body.

The most important aspect of this communication between the family and the living dead through the branch is to avert the disenchantment of the living dead, which has the potential of unleashing darkness that could be generational. This communication should be specific in terms of the types of death and illness that should not befall the family. The generations to come should ultimately not be followed by generational curses that could have been averted by performing a proper ritual during burial, regardless of the circumstances.

### **Findings**

The pandemic has disrupted various cultural practices and traditions. As a rite of passage in African communities, funerals are often conducted in a sequence, as stipulated by different tribes' rituals. COVID-19 seems to have eroded these cultural practices, and the altered grieving process is unfamiliar to the families who have experienced the death of a family member. This leaves families in an incomplete mourning process and feelings of nostalgia since families cannot perform the required rituals to gain closure. The deceased is assumed to be joining the world of the living dead unceremoniously.

The IKS has always provided African societies with methodologies to send the deceased off to the world of the living dead in times of distress. Thus, the researcher asserts that there are different divination processes, including the use of a special tree branch in accidental deaths, where the spirit of the departed soul is removed by conversing with this indigenous branch in a specific manner related to the prescripts of the specific tribe. To adhere to COVID-19 burial guidelines and appease the world of the living dead, this indigenous branch can be used to communicate with the deceased and make them a messenger to report their particular family's circumstances to the world of the living dead. Though the process is unfamiliar, it is assumed that following IKS' prescripts of burial rituals may result in some form of closure. To a certain extent, I believe this branch may facilitate communication between the bereaved family and the spirit world and calm the wrath that may otherwise be unleashed on the family, should there be no respectful commination with the spirit world.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 burial guidelines issued by the Department of Health have disrupted African communities' funeral and burial practices. During times of lockdown, gatherings were not permitted, and people were confined to their homes. Death was the only occasion where up to 50 people could convene for a funeral under the environmental health practitioners' guidelines. Family members could not access the remains of the deceased and perform traditional rituals, which was very unsettling for African communities.

This study set out to answer the question, "how can families use the IKS during funerals and burials to get some form of closure and appease the living dead?" It was also considered whether there is a need for a new form of communication during burials to appease the ancestors. I report that the African IKS have always been a step ahead on issues of burials. For instance, African people communicate with those who succumbed to accidental deaths through a special branch, and this same practice can be followed during a COVID-19 burial, where the human remains are regarded as having experienced an 'accidental death'.

My own journey and enquiry have given me the confidence that the spirit world is sympathetic towards the changes in this world. They can be communicated with humility, as the living dead do listen. This communication may offer closure to the bereaved family and ensure the proper send-off of a loved one to the world of the living dead. Writing this has ignited the understanding that in the modern world as Africans who believe in the living dead, we need not be in a state of panic, as the dynamic nature the world will always persist. Consequently, the IKS can be adapted to be able to continue integrating the spirit world in all that we do. I appreciated this exercise as it became a test of my indigenous knowledge and the issues of the day that have directly touched on my own understating of the spirit world.

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